

Speech for the opening of the exhibition**“The Third World in World War II”****on 28 February 2017****at the Castle of Good Hope****in Cape Town (South Africa)**by **Karl Rössel** (recherche international e.V., Cologne/Germany)Opening remarks:

Good evening and thank you for attending the opening of our exhibition here today. I'd also like to thank the previous speakers for their introductory words. After presenting the exhibition at 60 locations in Germany and Switzerland, it is a special honour for us, the recherche international collective, to now be able to bring our exhibition to one of the countries where our historical research began more than 20 years ago. Many people in South Africa and in Germany contributed to today's exhibition opening, but forgive me for naming just Denis Goldberg, and please consider him to represent everyone who was involved. Ever since he came to the exhibition in Germany six years ago, he has pursued the idea of presenting an English-language version here in South Africa. So, a huge thank you from the bottom of my heart to Denis Goldberg.

I'd also like to thank the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation who helped with my travel expenses so I could attend today and the EXILE – Coordination of Culture who helped with finding the funds for the production of the English-language version.

The road to making this exhibition happen was truly a long one, and I'm not just referring to the distance between Cologne and Cape Town.

Even our research took us around the world. We travelled to a total of 30 African, Asian and Pacific Island countries to find and chronicle the accounts of contemporary witnesses from the so-called Third World who contributed towards liberating the world from German National Socialism, Italian fascism and Japanese megalomania. The origins of this project can be traced back more than three decades. It was in the mid-1980s that we in the collective of freelance journalists that I belonged to, started work on a book about the history of the internationalism movement in Germany. We ourselves were active members of several initiatives. At the time we realised that the

forms of solidarity we were showing in Europe had already been seen in many Third World countries during the Second World War as a means of supporting the global fight against fascism. Dockers in Cuba, for example, raised funds for the Red Army, just as we later did to support liberation movements. And activists from Buenos Aires to the Philippine capital Manila called for people to "stop buying fascist products", as we later did during the anti-Apartheid movement.

By talking to people in Third World countries we also learned that a great number of people from all of the world's continents had fought as soldiers and partisans against the fascist Axis powers. But when in 1985 we wanted to look up how many (colonial) soldiers had fought for the Allies in the Second World War, we couldn't find a single history book with reliable information on the matter. Even those from the Third World who had lost their lives were excluded from the statistics on Second World War casualties.

We found the omission of such large parts of the world from Second World War historiography so outrageous that we decided to try to do something about it. From the mid-1990s we conducted systematic research on the subject and travelled to Africa, Asia, Australia and the Pacific islands to interview contemporary witnesses and historians, and to collect books, photos, archive material and historical documents.

It quickly became apparent that the consequences of the Second World War for the Third World, which had largely been ignored in Europe, in the affected countries themselves were still very present and had been remarkably comprehensively appraised.

For example, in almost every large African city we visited there was a building where we could meet and interview veterans who had fought in World War II. In the former French colonies, these meeting points are known as "maison d'anciens combattants", in former British colonies and here in South Africa they're called "Ex-Servicemen's Clubs".

Everywhere we went we met contemporary witnesses in these veterans clubs who explicitly asked us to finally make their accounts known in the countries that were responsible for waging the war in the first place.

We understood straight away our role as translators and intermediaries for these forgotten war heroes. That's why listening stations with original recordings of eye-

witnesses from different countries and continents are an important component of our exhibition.

We also consulted local historians for our research wherever possible, such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Burkina Faso, who was the first person to document Africa's history from an African perspective. When I interviewed him in Ouagadougou, he called the Second World War "the most devastating event for Africa since the slave trade". The full quotation can be found in the exhibition's Africa chapter.

In Manila, I met Ricardo Trota José from the University of the Philippines, who had spent many years researching the consequences of Japanese occupation. He revealed to me the shocking statistic that one in every 16 people in his country was killed during the war, a total of 1.1 million people.

A friendly Sinologist brought us eye-witness reports of survivors of the massacre in Nanking, the former Chinese capital, where the Japanese murdered more than 300,000 Chinese in the space of a few weeks. The Nanking Massacre took place at the end of 1937 and start of 1938, at a time when, in conventional wisdom at least, the Second World War hadn't even begun.

Many of the historical coordinates that we use to map the Second World War are questionable, if not downright wrong. This also applies to the dates we use. The first of September 1939 was only the beginning of the war in Europe. It had already long been underway in Asia, amongst other places, with millions already dead in China. And in Africa the war had been raging since the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 – a war in which soldiers from 17 countries and four continents fought until Italian capitulation in 1941, but not one that was termed a "world war" because it wasn't taking place in Europe, but rather in Africa, and because the majority of those fighting were black and colonised people, rather than white people.

The dubious nature of conventional historiography when it comes to the consequences of war on other continents is documented in this exhibition through several prototypical citations on the panels entitled "Twisted History".

As an example there are countless history books containing the sentence about the war only "developing into a world war" when the Japanese air force attacked the American base Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii was famously in December 1941, but by then war had already been raging for four years in Asia with millions of casualties, and for six years in Africa.

It's this kind of ignorance of non-European Second World War history that we hope to put an end to with this exhibition.

We're not talking about marginal events here, but rather a missing half of Second World War history.

In fact, more soldiers from the Third World were involved in the Second World War than from Europe (not including the Soviet Union).

There were 14 million in China alone.

Of the 11 million soldiers under British command, five million were from colonies. India supplied 2.5 million soldiers in the Second World War, thus comprising the largest colonial army of all time.

The Free French Forces were also made up predominantly of Africans, until shortly before the end of the war.

Approximately one million Africans served in the war under French command, and a further million for the British.

Then there were Haile Selassie's 250,000 soldiers and the 500,000 partisans who resisted the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, plus the hundreds and thousands of people throughout Africa who were sent into forced labour to mine the raw materials needed for the belligerent powers' arms industries.

In South Africa, as you probably know, around 335,000 men and women were recruited to serve in the war.

60,000 of them fought against German and Italian troops in North Africa in 1941. This led to the following significant event that is documented on one of our exhibition panels:

"On 21st November, the fifth brigade of the "Cape Corps" was engaged in a costly battle against German panzer divisions and fighter planes during which 3,000 South Africans were captured by the Germans and 224 killed. The survivors buried their dead side by side in a mass grave. But the South African High Command had the bodies exhumed shortly afterwards to bury them again – this time separated according to colour. Apartheid didn't become an official state doctrine in South Africa

until 1948, but the military already practised strict “racial segregation” during the war.”

We are delighted that further facts about the role of South Africa in the Second World War will be presented here in the Castle Museum in Cape Town, in addition to those in our exhibition.

The price that people in the Third World paid for liberating the world from fascism was extremely high.

China alone suffered more casualties than Germany, Japan and Italy combined – today's estimates by both Chinese and European historians put the figure at more than 20 million!

Millions of other casualties in the Second World War are still to this day yet to be mentioned in the statistics, as they – as colonised people – were either not counted or their deaths were statistically attributed to their colonial powers.

What the history books have largely ignored until now as well is how many Third World countries were destroyed by the Second World War fighting and how they were plundered economically for the war.

That helps to explain the structure of our exhibition. Facts such as these need to be explained, rather than simply being documented by the means of photos, as they are hard to place without the background information as context. At the same time, you don't need to read every panel for the exhibition's goal to be achieved. Each panel presents its own standalone story. Even if you were to read very few of them, you would soon get an idea of the magnitude of what until now has largely been concealed.

The exhibition consists of three large geographical chapters on the role of Africa, Asia and Oceania in the Second World War, and a smaller chapter on Latin America.

There are also two subject-related chapters.

The first looks at the persecution of Jews outside Europe. The Nazis' megalomania ultimately spanned as far as the Jewish ghetto of Shanghai in China, and in North Africa the fascist Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Vichy France set up more than 100 prison camps, often in remote areas on the periphery of the Sahara. Anti-fascists and resistance fighters were detained there for forced labour and 5,000 North African

Jews were murdered. If the German-Italian advance into Egypt and Palestine had been successful, it would have resulted in the extermination of 700,000 Jews in the region. The SS unit that had been earmarked to carry it out arrived in Tunisia in 1942 and – as they did in Eastern Europe - worked on finding enough local collaborators to go ahead with their plans of continuing the Holocaust in Arab countries.

Our exhibition also looks at these and other sympathisers and allies of the fascist Axis powers in a second subject-related chapter on collaboration.

Prominent Nazi collaborators from Palestine, Iraq and India resided in the German capital Berlin during the war, for example, and not only willingly worked for the Nazis' propaganda machine and international radio station, but also recruited tens of thousands of their compatriots as volunteers for the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS. In order to avoid misinterpretation, I would like to state that on all continents there were without doubt more people fighting *against* fascism than on the side of Germany, Italy and Japan. But for the sake of historical integrity, it must also be said that, besides all of these anti-fascist fighters, there were movements and international networks all over the world that supported fascism. Their collaboration undoubtedly made the war longer and the consequence was millions of additional casualties that would otherwise have been avoided without their collaboration. That's why we feel it is imperative to also include these historical facts in our exhibition.

As with our publications we see our exhibition not as the conclusion or end result, but simply as a modest starting point and a gentle push towards a change in historical perspective.

This is much-needed when we look at current-day international politics.

Against the backdrop of the fact that hundreds of thousands of soldiers from Africa fought from 1939 under Allied command against fascist troops, and not only in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, but also on frontlines in Europe (in Italy, France and Germany), then rich Europe should really be ashamed with the hysteria with which it has recently greeted the arrival of refugees from Africa and other continents on the island of Lampedusa, in Greece, and along other European borders.

More than 4,000 refugees lost their lives on boats in the Mediterranean last year alone, which has become the world's largest mass grave. 25,000 people have died on Europe's external borders in the last decade. Approximately half of these casualties were from Africa. Many of them may have had relatives who served in the Second World War to liberate Europe from fascism. But even the children and grandchildren of those Africans who died for Europe's freedom now struggle to get visas to visit the graves of their ancestors who are buried in European cemeteries.

Taking a global look at history in general, and at the Second World War in particular, should result in us Europeans showing more solidarity with refugees fleeing war, and in all industrialised nations that were involved in the war facing up to their historical responsibility concerning the continents, countries and regions that they devastated through colonisation and war.

Thank you for listening.

For further information see:

www.3www2.de (English)